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Swami Vivekananda's Vision of Hinduism

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ABSTRACT: Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu from India. His teachings and philosophy are a reinterpretation and synthesis of various strands of Hindu thought, most notably classical yoga and (Advanta) Vedanta, with western esotericism and Universalism. He blended religion with nationalism, and applied this reinterpretation to various aspect's of education, faith, character building as well as social issues pertaining to India. His influence extended also to the west, and he was instrumental in introducing Yoga to the west.

Adhikārivāda in Hinduism, claimed special rights and privileges with regard to the right to universal knowledge of the Upanishads. Vivekananda rejected Adhikārivāda which, in his view, was the outcome of pure selfishness and ignored both the infinite possibilities of the human soul and the fact that all men are capable of receiving knowledge if it is imparted in their own respective languages. He claimed, there is no reason for access to the universal knowledge of the Upanishads to be restricted on the basis of caste or religion. Vivekananda propagated that the essence of Hinduism was best expressed in Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Nevertheless, following Ramakrishna, and in contrast to Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda believed that the Absolute is both immanent and transcendent. According to Anil Sooklal, Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta "reconciles Dvaita or dualism and Advaita or non-dualism," viewing Brahman as "one without a second," yet "both qualified, saguna, and qualityless, nirguna." Vivekananda summarised the Vedanta as follows, giving it a modern and Universalistic interpretation, showing the influence of classical yoga:

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or mental discipline, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

KEYWORDS: Swami Vivekananda, Hinduism, Vedanta, Brahman, Yoga, Privileges, Upanishads

I. INTRODUCTION

In line with the influence of western ideas, Vivekananda stressed the importance of individual development. Swami Vivekananda realized three things are necessary to make every man great, every nation great, namely conviction of the powers of goodness; absence of jealousy and suspicion; and helping all who are trying to be and do good. Swami Vivekananda suggested trying to give up jealousy and conceit and learn to work unitedly for others. He told that purity, patience and perseverance overcome all obstacles. He suggested taking courage and work on. Patience and steady work, according to Swami Vivekananda, this is the only way to get success.

According to Swami Vivekananda, "faith in ourselves and faith in God- this is the secret of greatness". [1,2]





Swami Vivekananda observed the history of the world is the history of a few men who had faith in themselves, and it is faith which calls out divinity within. So he told, if people have faith in three hundred and thirty millions of Hindu mythological gods, and in all the gods which foreigners have now and still have no faith in themselves, there will be no salvation. To Vivekananda, religion was not mere theory, but an actual practice to be applied in life, raising the brute into man, and man into God, stating "it is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes." He hated the religious rituals that were in practice during that time. Vivekananda also noted that meditation in isolation won't suffice:

The tidal wave of Western Civilisation is now rushing over the length and breadth of the country. It won't do now simply to sit in meditation on mountain tops without realizing in the least its usefulness. Now is wanted intense Karmayoga, with unbounded courage and indomitable strength in the heart. Then only will the people of the country be roused.

He emphasized that the caste system was not by birth as per ancient Hindu traditions. It is more about social structure i.e. by profession where a child born in a Kshatriya family can become brahmin also. A striking contrast was noticed in the idea of Vivekananda regarding the caste system. Strangely enough, he supported the Varna system as described in the Vedas. Unfolding the advantages of the caste system, he told that division of labour is a great blessing of this system. It would lead to excellence in any profession.[3,4]

This division, of course, will lead to a caste on the path of progress. However, he also exposed the evils of this system. Untouchability was its worst part. So, Vivekananda criticized this type of "Don't touches". He wanted to curb out this type of dogmatism from the society.

At the threshold of youth Narendra had to pass through a period of spiritual crisis when he was assailed by doubts about the existence of God. It was at that time he first heard about Sri Ramakrishna from one of his English professors at college. One day in November 1881, Narendra went to meet Sri Ramakrishna who was staying at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar. He straightaway asked the Master a question which he had put to several others but had received no satisfactory answer: "Sir, have you seen God?" Without a moment's hesitation, Sri Ramakrishna replied: "Yes, I have. I see Him as clearly as I see you, only in a much intenser sense."

Apart from removing doubts from the mind of Narendra, Sri Ramakrishna won him over through his pure, unselfish love. Thus began a guru-disciple relationship which is quite unique in the history of spiritual masters. Narendra now became a frequent visitor to Dakshineswar and, under the guidance of the Master, made rapid strides on the spiritual path. At Dakshineswar, Narendra also met several young men who were devoted to Sri Ramakrishna, and they all became close friends.

After a few years two events took place which caused Narendra considerable distress. One was the sudden death of his father in 1884. This left the family penniless, and Narendra had to bear the burden of supporting his mother, brothers and sisters. The second event was the illness of Sri Ramakrishna which was diagnosed to be cancer of the throat. In September 1885 Sri Ramakrishna was moved to a house at Shyampukur, and a few months later to a rented villa at Cossipore. In these two places the young disciples nursed the Master with devoted care. In spite of poverty at home and inability to find a job for himself, Narendra joined the group as its leader.

Sri Ramakrishna instilled in these young men the spirit of renunciation and brotherly love for one another. One day he distributed ochre robes among them and sent them out to beg food. In this way he himself laid the foundation for a new monastic order. He gave specific instructions to Narendra about the formation of the new monastic Order. In the small hours of 16 August 1886 Sri Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body.[5,6]

After the Master's passing, fifteen of his young disciples (one more joined them later) began to live together in a dilapidated building at Baranagar in North Kolkata. Under the leadership of Narendra, they formed a new monastic brotherhood, and in 1887 they took the formal vows of sannyasa, thereby assuming new names. Narendra now became Swami Vivekananda (although this name was actually assumed much later.)

II. DISCUSSION

After establishing the new monastic order, Vivekananda heard the inner call for a greater mission in his life. While most of the followers of Sri Ramakrishna thought of him in relation to their own personal lives, Vivekananda thought of the Master in relation to India and the rest of the world. As the prophet of the present age, what was Sri Ramakrishna's message to the modern world and to India in particular? This question and the awareness of his own



inherent powers urged Swamiji to go out alone into the wide world. So in the middle of 1890, after receiving the blessings of Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, known to the world as Holy Mother, who was then staying in Kolkata, Swamiji left Baranagar Math and embarked on a long journey of exploration and discovery of India.

During his travels all over India, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses. He was the first religious leader in India to understand and openly declare that the real cause of India's downfall was the neglect of the masses. The immediate need was to provide food and other bare necessities of life to the hungry millions. For this they should be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc. It was in this context that Vivekananda grasped the crux of the problem of poverty in India (which had escaped the attention of social reformers of his days): owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lot. It was first of all necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. For this they needed a life-giving, inspiring message. Swamiji found this message in the principle of the Atman, the doctrine of the potential divinity of the soul, taught in Vedanta, the ancient system of religious philosophy of India. He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion, but they had never been taught the life-giving, ennobling principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life.

Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: secular knowledge to improve their economic condition, and spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their moral sense. The next question was, how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses? Through education – this was the answer that Swamiji found.

One thing became clear to Swamiji: to carry out his plans for the spread of education and for the uplift of the poor masses, and also of women, an efficient organization of dedicated people was needed. As he said later on, he wanted "to set in motion a machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." It was to serve as this 'machinery' that Swamiji founded the Ramakrishna Mission a few years later.[7,8]

III. RESULTS

It was when these ideas were taking shape in his mind in the course of his wanderings that Swami Vivekananda heard about the World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers in India wanted him to attend the Parliament. He too felt that the Parliament would provide the right forum to present his Master's message to the world, and so he decided to go to America. Another reason which prompted Swamiji to go to America was to seek financial help for his project of uplifting the masses.

Swamiji, however, wanted to have an inner certitude and divine call regarding his mission. Both of these he got while he sat in deep meditation on the rock-island at Kanyakumari. With the funds partly collected by his Chennai disciples and partly provided by the Raja of Khetri, Swami Vivekananda left for America from Mumbai on 31 May 1893.

His speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions held in September 1893 made him famous as an 'orator by divine right' and as a 'Messenger of Indian wisdom to the Western world'. After the Parliament, Swamiji spent nearly three and a half years spreading Vedanta as lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna, mostly in the eastern parts of USA and also in London.

He returned to India in January 1897. In response to the enthusiastic welcome that he received everywhere, he delivered a series of lectures in different parts of India, which created a great stir all over the country. Through these inspiring and profoundly significant lectures Swamiji attempted to do the following:

To rouse the religious consciousness of the people and create in them pride in their cultural heritage;

To bring about unification of Hinduism by pointing out the common bases of its sects;

To focus the attention of educated people on the plight of the downtrodden masses, and to expound his plan for their uplift by the application of the principles of Practical Vedanta.

Soon after his return to Kolkata, Swami Vivekananda accomplished another important task of his mission on earth. He founded on 1 May 1897 a unique type of organization known as Ramakrishna Mission, in which monks and lay people would jointly undertake propagation of Practical Vedanta, and various forms of social service, such as running hospitals, schools, colleges, hostels, rural development centres etc, and conducting massive relief and rehabilitation work for victims of earthquakes, cyclones and other calamities, in different parts of India and other countries.



In early 1898 Swami Vivekananda acquired a big plot of land on the western bank of the Ganga at a place called Belur to have a permanent abode for the monastery and monastic Order originally started at Baranagar, and got it registered as Ramakrishna Math after a couple of years. Here Swamiji established a new, universal pattern of monastic life which adapts ancient monastic ideals to the conditions of modern life, which gives equal importance to personal illumination and social service, and which is open to all men without any distinction of religion, race or caste.

It may be mentioned here that in the West many people were influenced by Swami Vivekananda's life and message. Some of them became his disciples or devoted friends. Among them the names of Margaret Noble (later known as Sister Nivedita), Captain and Mrs Sevier, Josephine McLeod and Sara Ole Bull, deserve special mention. Nivedita dedicated her life to educating girls in Kolkata. Swamiji had many Indian disciples also, some of whom joined Ramakrishna Math and became sannyasins.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

In June 1899 he went to the West on a second visit. This time he spent most of his time in the West coast of USA. After delivering many lectures there, he returned to Belur Math in December 1900. The rest of his life was spent in India, inspiring and guiding people, both monastic and lay. Incessant work, especially giving lectures and inspiring people, told upon Swamiji's health. His health deteriorated and the end came quietly on the night of 4 July 1902. Before his Mahasamadhi he had written to a Western follower: "It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body, to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God." [9,10]

Making an objective assessment of Swami Vivekananda's contributions to world culture, the eminent British historian A L Basham stated that "in centuries to come, he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world..." Some of the main contributions that Swamiji made to the modern world are mentioned below:

1. New Understanding of Religion : One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world is his interpretation of religion as a universal experience of transcendent Reality, common to all humanity. Swamiji met the challenge of modern science by showing that religion is as scientific as science itself; religion is the 'science of consciousness'. As such, religion and science are not contradictory to each other but are complementary.

This universal conception frees religion from the hold of superstitions, dogmatism, priestcraft and intolerance, and makes religion the highest and noblest pursuit – the pursuit of supreme Freedom, supreme Knowledge, supreme Happiness.

2. New View of Man : Vivekananda's concept of 'potential divinity of the soul' gives a new, ennobling concept of man. The present age is the age of humanism which holds that man should be the chief concern and centre of all activities and thinking. Through science and technology man has attained great prosperity and power, and modern methods of communication and travel have converted human society into a 'global village'. But the degradation of man has also been going on apace, as witnessed by the enormous increase in broken homes, immorality, violence, crime, etc. in modern society. Vivekananda's concept of potential divinity of the soul prevents this degradation, divinizes human relationships, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Swamiji has laid the foundation for 'spiritual humanism', which is manifesting itself through several neo-humanistic movements and the current interest in meditation, Zen etc all over the world.

3. New Principle of Morality and Ethics : The prevalent morality, in both individual life and social life, is mostly based on fear – fear of the police, fear of public ridicule, fear of God's punishment, fear of Karma, and so on. The current theories of ethics also do not explain why a person should be moral and be good to others. Vivekananda has given a new theory of ethics and new principle of morality based on the intrinsic purity and oneness of the Atman. We should be pure because purity is our real nature, our true divine Self or Atman. Similarly, we should love and serve our neighbours because we are all one in the Supreme Spirit known as Paramatman or Brahman.

4. Bridge between the East and the West : Another great contribution of Swami Vivekananda was to build a bridge between Indian culture and Western culture. He did it by interpreting Hindu scriptures and philosophy and the Hindu way of life and institutions to the Western people in an idiom which they could understand. He made the Western people realize that they had to learn much from Indian spirituality for their own well-being. He showed that, in spite of her poverty and backwardness, India had a great contribution to make to world culture. In this way he was instrumental



in ending India's cultural isolation from the rest of the world. He was India's first great cultural ambassador to the West.

On the other hand, Swamiji's interpretation of ancient Hindu scriptures, philosophy, institutions, etc prepared the mind of Indians to accept and apply in practical life two best elements of Western culture, namely science and technology and humanism. Swamiji has taught Indians how to master Western science and technology and at the same time develop spiritually. Swamiji has also taught Indians how to adapt Western humanism (especially the ideas of individual freedom, social equality and justice and respect for women) to Indian ethos.[11]

In spite of her innumerable linguistic, ethnic, historical and regional diversities, India has had from time immemorial a strong sense of cultural unity. It was, however, Swami Vivekananda who revealed the true foundations of this culture and thus clearly defined and strengthened the sense of unity as a nation.

Swamiji gave Indians proper understanding of their country's great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past. Furthermore, he pointed out to Indians the drawbacks of Western culture and the need for India's contribution to overcome these drawbacks. In this way Swamiji made India a nation with a global mission.

Sense of unity, pride in the past, sense of mission – these were the factors which gave real strength and purpose to India's nationalist movement. Several eminent leaders of India's freedom movement have acknowledged their indebtedness to Swamiji. Free India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Rooted in the past, full of pride in India's prestige, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life's problems, and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present ... he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past." Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose wrote: "Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect, self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings."

Swamiji's most unique contribution to the creation of new India was to open the minds of Indians to their duty to the downtrodden masses. Long before the ideas of Karl Marx were known in India, Swamiji spoke about the role of the labouring classes in the production of the country's wealth. Swamiji was the first religious leader in India to speak for the masses, formulate a definite philosophy of service, and organize large-scale social service.

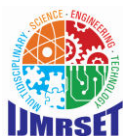
Identity: It was Swami Vivekananda who gave to Hinduism as a whole a clear-cut identity, a distinct profile. Before Swamiji came Hinduism was a loose confederation of many different sects. Swamiji was the first religious leader to speak about the common bases of Hinduism and the common ground of all sects. He was the first person, as guided by his Master Sri Ramakrishna, to accept all Hindu doctrines and the views of all Hindu philosophers and sects as different aspects of one total view of Reality and way of life known as Hinduism. Speaking about Swamiji's role in giving Hinduism its distinct identity, Sister Nivedita wrote: "... it may be said that when he began to speak it was of 'the religious ideas of the Hindus', but when he ended, Hinduism had been created." [12]

Unification: Before Swamiji came, there was a lot of quarrel and competition among the various sects of Hinduism. Similarly, the protagonists of different systems and schools of philosophy were claiming their views to be the only true and valid ones. By applying Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of Harmony (Samanvaya) Swamiji brought about an overall unification of Hinduism on the basis of the principle of unity in diversity. Speaking about Swamiji's role in this field K M Pannikar, the eminent historian and diplomat, wrote: "This new Shankaracharya may well be claimed to be a unifier of Hindu ideology."

Defence: Another important service rendered by Swamiji was to raise his voice in defence of Hinduism. In fact, this was one of the main types of work he did in the West. Christian missionary propaganda had given a wrong understanding of Hinduism and India in Western minds. Swamiji had to face a lot of opposition in his attempts to defend Hinduism.

Meeting the Challenges: At the end of the 19th century, India in general, and Hinduism in particular, faced grave challenges from Western materialistic life, the ideas of Western free society, and the proselytizing activities of Christians. Vivekananda met these challenges by integrating the best elements of Western culture in Hindu culture.

New Ideal of Monasticism: A major contribution of Vivekananda to Hinduism is the rejuvenation and modernization of monasticism. In this new monastic ideal, followed in the Ramakrishna Order, the ancient principles of renunciation and



God realization are combined with service to God in man (Shiva jnane jiva seva). Vivekananda elevated social service to the status of divine service.

Refurbishing of Hindu Philosophy and Religious Doctrines: Vivekananda did not merely interpret ancient Hindu scriptures and philosophical ideas in terms of modern thought. He also added several illuminating original concepts based on his own transcendental experiences and vision of the future. This, however, needs a detailed study of Hindu philosophy which cannot be attempted here.[13]

V. CONCLUSIONS

My ideal, indeed, can be put into a few words, and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.

Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.

We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet.

So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them.

Whatever you think, that you will be. If you think yourselves weak, weak you will be; if you think yourselves strong, strong you will be.

If you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty millions of your mythological gods, ... and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you. Have faith in yourselves, and stand up on that faith and be strong; that is what we need.

Strength, strength it is that we want so much in this life, for what we call sin and sorrow have all one cause, and that is our weakness. With weakness comes ignorance, and with ignorance comes misery.

The older I grow, the more everything seems to me to lie in manliness. This is my new Gospel.

Purity, patience, and perseverance are the three essentials to success, and above all, love.

Religion is realization; not talk, not doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes.

Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man.

Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.

They alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.

This is the gist of all worship – to be pure and to do good to others.

It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the Soul of the Universe.[14]

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